

Who discovered Itasca Lake?

417

WHO DISCOVERED ITASCA LAKE? LETTER OF WM. MORRISON, AN EARLY INDIAN TRADER.

Chow Wing, Benton County, M. T., 17th February, 1856

Hon. Alexander Ramsey , St. Paul

Dear Sir :—Inclosed you will find who the first discoverer of the source of the Mississippi is. William Morrison , my brother, came to this country in 1802 and left in 1826. He is now seventy-five years of age, and was the first American citizen who extended the first line of trading posts from Old Grand Portage to Lake of the Woods; was then agent for the old American Fur Company, of New York, and is well known in the West, by all the oldest pioneers. I am astonished that Mr. Schoolcraft should claim that honor, for I could with safety claim it before him myself; for I saw Itasca Lake before that gentleman or Mr. Nicollet ever thought of coming to this part of the country. You will much oblige me by presenting the within information to the Historical Society of Minnesota, to which I will add, hereafter, some information relative to the first traders, their progress, etc.

I remain yours, most respectfully, ALLAN MORRISON.

Allan Morrison , Esq.:

Dear Brother :—In answering your favor of the 10th of January, I will pass several incidents that I presume you 26 418 are well informed of, and give you the time and circumstances that led me to be the first white man that discovered the source of the great Mississippi River. I left Grand Portage, on the north shore of Lake Superior, now the boundary line between the United States and British Possessions, in the year 1802,

and landed at Leech Lake in September or October, the same year. I wintered on one of the streams of the Crow Wing, near its source. Our Indians were Pillagers. In 1803 and 4, I went and wintered at Rice Lake. I passed by Red Cedar Lake, now called Cass Lake, followed up the Mississippi to Cross Lake, and then up the Mississippi again to Elk Lake, now called Itasca Lake, the source of the great River Mississippi. A short distance this side, I made a portage, to get to Rice River, which is called the Portage of the Heights of Land, or the dividing ridge that separates the waters of the Mississippi, and those that empty into the Red River of the north; thence to Hudson's Bay, the portage is short.

I discovered no traces of any white man before me, when I visited Itasca Lake, in 1804. And if the late General Pike did not lay it down as such, when he came to Leech Lake, it is because he did not happen to meet me. I was at an outpost that winter. The late General Pike laid down Cass Lake, on his map, as the head of the Mississippi River. In 1811–12, I went the same route, to winter on Rice River, near the plains. There I overtook a gentleman with an outfit, from Mackinac, by the name of Otesse , with whom I parted only at Fond du Lac, he taking the southern route, to Mackinac, and I the northern to headquarters, which had been changed from Grand Portage to Fort William. This will explain to you that I visited Itasca Lake, then called Elk Lake, in 1803–4, and in 1811–12, and five small streams that empty into the Lake, that are short, and soon lose themselves in the swamps.

419

By way of explanation, why the late General Pike , then Captain Pike , in 1805, who had orders to stem the Mississippi to its source, and was stopped by the ice a little below Swan River, at the place since called Pike's Rapids or Pike's Block House, and had to proceed from there to Leech Lake on foot. He had to learn there where the source of the Mississippi was. Pie went to Cass Lake, and could proceed no further. He had been told that I knew the source, but could not see me, I being out at an outpost. This want of information made him commit the error; some person, not knowing better, told him there was no river above Cass Lake. Cass Lake receives the waters of Cross Lake, and Cross

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Lake those of Itasca Lake, and five small streams that empty into Itasca Lake, then called Elk Lake. Those streams I have noted before, no white man can claim the discovery of the source of the Mississippi before me, for I was the first that saw and examined its shores.

Yours, Signed, WM. MORRISON.